

# Wellness Notes

## Hearing Loss\*

(Part II)

### Causes and Prevention

Hearing loss happens for many reasons. Some people lose their hearing slowly as they age. This condition is called presbycusis. Doctors do not know why presbycusis happens, but it seems to run in families. Another cause is the ear infection otitis media, which can lead to long-term hearing loss if it is not treated.

Hearing loss can also result from taking certain medications. "Ototoxic" medicines damage the inner ear, sometimes permanently. Some antibiotics are ototoxic. Even aspirin can cause problems, but they are temporary. Check with your doctor if you notice a problem while taking a medication.

Heredity also is a cause of hearing loss, but not all inherited forms of hearing loss take place at birth. Some forms can show up later in life. In otosclerosis, which is thought to be a hereditary disease, an abnormal growth of bone prevents structures within the ear from working properly. A severe blow to the head also can cause hearing loss.

One of the most common causes of hearing loss is loud noise. Loud noise can permanently damage the inner ear. Loud noise also contributes to presbycusis, or age-related hearing loss, and tinnitus, which is a ringing, buzzing, or roaring sound in the ears.

More than 30 million Americans are exposed to damaging noise levels every day. Already, 22 million American adults between 20 and 69 years of age have permanently damaged their hearing due to exposure to loud noise. Although awareness of noise levels is important, you should also be aware of how far away you are from loud noise and how long you are exposed to it. Avoid noises that are too loud (85 decibels and above), that are too close, and that last too long.

There are other ways to prevent hearing loss. If earwax blockage is a problem for you, ear, nose, and throat doctors recommend using mild treatments such as mineral oil, baby oil, glycerin, or commercial ear drops to soften earwax. If you suspect that you may have a hole in your eardrum, however, you should consult a doctor before using such products.

The ear infection otitis media is most common in children, but adults can get it, too. You can help prevent otitis media by washing your hands frequently. Also, get a flu shot every year to help stave off flu-related ear infections. If you still get an ear infection, see a doctor immediately before it becomes more serious.

Do you take medication? If so, ask your doctor if your medicine is ototoxic, or damaging to the ear. Ask if other drugs can be used instead. If not, ask if the dose can be safely reduced. Sometimes it cannot. However, your doctor will help you get the medicine you need while trying to reduce unwanted side effects.